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ABSTRACT

Noting the need for research to support and inform early childhood classroom practices, this paper describes action research and presents examples of studies prepared by preservice teachers or by certified teachers pursuing master's degrees in education. Action research, aligned with regularly used assessment strategies, is a method whereby educators and child care practitioners can obtain information through literature review, data collection, and personal reflection to inform their practice without using the strict controls or statistics applied to traditional research design. Three of the action research examples presented concern teachers' needs to learn about language development in young children. One of the examples focuses on year-round schooling. The final example concerns parental perceptions regarding teachers' competence. Each of the action researchers defined their own research strategies to obtain needed information and acquired knowledge important to them. The paper concludes that organizing a study to solve a specific educational problem or to discover more information about given environments is the true nature of action research. Contains 20 references. (KB)

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Action Research Revisited
Five Field Examples

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Action Research Revisited: Five Field Examples

The kindergarten team notices that parent participation in regularly-scheduled early evening socials is dwindling during the year, and they want to know why. A first grade teacher is aware that several of her students seem sleepy during snack time each morning, and her curiosity is aroused as to why. A center director discovers that one piece of playground equipment needs constant repair, and she wants to investigate the reasons this event keeps reoccurring.

Each of these aforementioned situations create a scenario worthy of research, which is essential to developing center and school policy, as well as enhancing classroom instruction. Administrators are usually alert to activities in their schools that affect efficient operations, and classroom methodology, especially that which represents "best practice" for young children, also requires professionals to focus on questions that affect the well-being of children. Bredekamp and Copple (1997), Bredekamp and Rosegrant, Eds. (1992), Katz and Chard (1989), Hendrick (1998), and others define the need for research documentation to support and inform practices teachers provide for children in classrooms. Most professional early childhood journals regularly publish articles about classroom research during the course of any publishing year.

The issue that surfaces, is that the word *research* often intimidates practitioners. Data collection, analysis and interpretation of data, sharing and disseminating information about the completed research seem formidable tasks and somewhat difficult to tackle. This issue was addressed in a recent *Dimensions of Early Childhood* article (Warner and Adams, 1996) which defined clear processes to

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use for action research. Among methods that were described are observations, anecdotal records, the use of screening instruments, and portfolio development (Warner and Adams, 1996).

Action Research Defined

Action research has as its goal to focus on questions or problems educators encounter in their educational settings. Principals, teachers, caregivers and center directors will discover that action research is what they need in order to find out information without having to worry about the statistical information which accompanies the strict controls applied to traditional research studies. Basically, action research allows individuals to (1) identify a concern or an area of interest in their schools, centers or classrooms; (2) formulate a question which focuses on the concern or interest; (3) determine how the question may be answered; (4) do a literature review; (5) collect information about the question; and, after reflection, (6) draw some conclusions about the question addressed.

Action research is aligned with assessment strategies that educators use on a regular basis. As adults focus on the nature of their specific question, the information they gather and the techniques they implement to learn about the children they serve, the more likely they will positively impact their educational settings and perhaps the community at large. Information assists in refining methodologies used in and out of the classroom.

The examples of action research shared below are studies prepared by educators in Texas and Georgia, individuals who are certified teachers pursuing Master's Degrees in Education or preservice teachers ready to enter public

education settings. The first three that are described are based on teachers' needs to learn about language development in young children. The last two are more global, focusing on year-round schooling and parental perceptions about the competence of teachers.

Example #1 - Strategies for Developing Emergent Literacy Skills in a Kindergarten Classroom

Teacher A's bilingual kindergarten classroom contained nine boys and nine girls, native Spanish speakers, who varied in their level of English proficiency. Her shared reading time, scheduled during group time, focused on reading strategies such as left-to-right progression, top to bottom direction of print, main idea, cause and effect, sequencing, predicting outcomes, and point of view. Selected poems, chants and songs were written on chart paper, and the children could follow along as the print was read aloud. Helping children recognize certain letters or words within a written piece was a foundation for the phonemic awareness the teacher wanted to assess.

As Teacher A conducted her research, she read about the effects of shared reading and guided reading on the language development of young children (Fisher, 1991; Christie, Enz, & Vukelich, 1997; Vukelich, 1997); and she became aware that familiar texts and opportunities to talk and write about books were important elements in literacy development (Fisher, 1991; Calkins, 1997). She decided to try guided reading and shared reading, and planned for children to write in response logs and journals on a daily basis.

As the kindergarten study progressed, Ms. Okuma noticed that journals, response logs and creative writing efforts increased. Though she observed growth in her children, what she also discovered was that the individual's ability to acquire knowledge about reading correlated highly with each child's developmental level. The summary of her classroom research led her to note that "attending workshops, talking to other teachers, and reading" will be a step toward creating a joyful learning environment for children (Okuma, 1998).

Example #2 - Early Reading

Teacher B was particularly interested in finding out about early reading and the appropriate intervention strategies required to assist her young daughter to learn to read. This research stemmed from her position as a graduate student who was not teaching at the time of her study and the belief that she might like to home school her child. She labeled herself as a "participating observer, storytime reader, and interviewer" for the action research she planned (Johnson, 1998). The data collection tools that were used included a pretest (Marie Clay's Concepts of Print Test) and post-test. observation notes recorded in a journal, audio taping of reading sessions, and interviews about stories as they were read.

Teacher B's review of the literature indicated that daily reading to children, providing access to print and modeling literacy skills are strong indicators that children will become more interested in reading (Taylor, 1983; Teale & Sulby, 1989; Fisher, 1991; Sulby & Edwards, 1993). For two weeks, B read to her daughter in an informal, relaxed setting every night (her child's bedroom). She allowed her daughter to lead the reading session, giving her time to ask questions or make

comments as the book was presented. A hidden tape recorder helped the researcher remember questions and comments the child made during the session for later entry into a journal the researcher was keeping to assist in her reflection. Mrs. Johnson also developed a checklist to collect data about reading interests and her daughter's attitude toward reading.

After analysis of the data and her personal reflection on the question she had posed for herself, Teacher B reports that the results of the study were that her daughter showed an increased interest in book reading, demonstrated a need for more information regarding stories that were read to her, and requested other books about the topics that were presented to her. She began to create her own stories, began using the stories in dramatic play, and developed a play process of reading to others.

Mrs. B also noticed that her daughter appeared to have a more positive attitude toward reading. Her own interpretation of the data, supported by her review of the literature, was that parents reading to their children is a critical component of emerging interest in reading. She has become a much stronger advocate for parents reading to their children as a strategy for interesting them in early reading.

Example #3 - Children with Language Delays

Because Teacher C had five children in her prekindergarten classes who had language delay, she organized a study to learn all about language acquisition theory in order to better understand how she could help each child in question (Reaux, 1997). Her review of the literature focused on theories of language development, the

development of language in normal children, the stages they pass through, and what types of speech were classified as language delay. She found quickly that helping her children meant that she needed to know more about them, the background of their language development, and the causes of their delays.

She interviewed the school's speech therapist and learned that screening instruments known as the Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (EOWPVT-R) and the Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (ROWPVT) were used to determine the degree of language delay by those who needed speech referral. In her own classroom, Ms. Reaux used an observation instrument she developed which asked these questions: "Does the child talk with adults?" "Does the child talk with peers?" "How does the child interact in play situations?" "Is the child in speech class?" "In group situations, does the child volunteer answers or wait to be called on?"

Observation and reflection about what she saw were strong components of this study. She noted the levels of play the children exhibited, whether they were socially competent and how verbal they were with others in group and play settings. She modified her instruction to provide more "wait time" when she talked to her nonverbal children, and she recognized that her question-asking techniques had been rather limited. Instead of always asking questions that could be answered with a yes or no

response, she chose to use questions that allowed for more open-ended comments from her children. Through time, she recognized that she had been utilizing

strategies that were appropriate for children with language delay, but she began using them with more conscious effort.

Ms. C's study taught her that many language delayed children will catch up to their peers, given time and opportunities to mature. She acquired classroom strategies to support the children she needed to help, began to understand the testing process better, learned what the label "language delay" truly meant, and developed a sensitivity to the language. needs of all of her students. In the end, she felt more comfortable when approaching Admission - Review - Dismissal (ARD) meetings with other professionals in her school, and she felt her assistance with the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) improved.

Example #4: Year-Round Schooling Survey

Students D and E were interested in year-round schooling, particularly since this type of scheduling is being considered by many school systems. Across the country, administrators and teachers are searching for solutions that address low achievement test scores. Lengthening the school day, providing more practice and drill, eliminating school parties, and paying closer attention to test objectives are among the strategies undertaken by many schools to attain higher standardized scores. When D and E reviewed the literature about year-round schooling, what they read indicated that teacher burnout may be eased, the drop-out rates may decrease and children's retention may increase. Family vacations and child care arrangements, on the other hand, are apt to pose problems for both teachers' and children's families.

Ms. D and Ms. E administered a survey (1998) to all teachers in a school that had moved to year-round schooling at the beginning of the 1998-99 school year. The 13 teachers felt that the children were more productive in their schoolwork and were retaining more information. The teachers also noted that discipline problems in the classroom were reduced, and they felt as teachers that were more productive. When asked to rate their impression of year-round school on a scale of one to ten with ten being highest, the group average was 9.3, indicating a positive impression during the initial months of the new scheduling.

Example #5: Parents' Perceptions of a Competent Teacher of Young Children

Student F and G are each adult re-entry students nearing completion of their certification programs. Concerned about developing positive relationships with parents, they wanted to explore parental perceptions of a competent teacher of the young child. The literature provided studies showing that parents considered the use of slang-free language, good grammar, high attendance, enthusiasm and high expectations characteristic of good teachers. The ability to apply a variety of teaching strategies, good role modeling and management skills were also noted.

F and G (1998) surveyed parents in 26 primary grade classrooms; ten were regular education teachers and the remaining 16 were special educators. Gender and age were rated as unimportant by all regular education parents and by most special education parents (63%). Classroom management skills were deemed very important, but flexibility in application of classroom rules was not as important (21%). Further, most parents (88%) felt that early childhood certification was

important and that teachers' knowledge base should be assessed during the certification process (92%).

Animation and enthusiasm were held in positive by parents of all regular educators, but by only 70% of parents of special educators. Conversely, only half of regular education parents viewed a quiet classroom as important, while 81% of special education parents held quiet classroom control in positive regard. F and G felt their study shed light on parent perceptions. Ms. G, who plans to teach early childhood special education, became more aware of parent concerns for order and control in management.

None of the action researchers named in this article felt overwhelmed with the individual studies they pursued. They had a need to know about issues that were interesting to them, they defined the strategies they wanted to use to get the information they needed, and they implemented their studies using the resources they had available. For each researcher, the knowledge they acquired was important to the particular situations they were in. Organizing a study to solve a specific educational problem or to discover more information about given environments is the true nature of action research.

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